The Apostrophe Revisited: Attitudes, errors and implications for teaching in an upper secondary school

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Abstract
An earlier corpus study on Swedish university students’ errors concerning the use of apostrophes when writing in English (overuse, omission and misplacement) is contrasted to a new corpus study of upper secondary pupils’ texts. The results turn out to be similar: omissions are numerous among the upper secondary pupils, but overuses negligible. The proportionally most common errors are omissions in genitive constructions. This is contrasted to the views of the classes’ teacher, who perceived contractions to be more problematic due to these errors being more numerous. The essay also briefly deals with the teaching and the future of the apostrophe.
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1. Introduction

During the spring term of 2005, the author of this text conducted a corpus study of errors concerning the apostrophe among University-level students of English. The study will hereafter be referred to as the 2005 study. 30 essays from the USE corpus of Uppsala university were proof-read and the errors catalogued according to type (overuse, omission or wrong placement of the apostrophe). The features which were searched were plurals, contractions, genitive singular and genitive plural.

The results were surprisingly conclusive: the errors were predominantly omissions in the genitive singular, genitive plural and contractions. There were a few instances of incorrect placement, but no cases of overuse whatsoever in the plurals. This was surprising as overuse is fairly common in English-speaking countries (Truss 2003:35). The findings were loosely attributed to transfer from Swedish.

Three years later, during teaching practise at an upper secondary school in Tierp, it seemed as though overuse was in fact quite prevalent in the pupils’ writing. This obviously different situation triggered a curiosity as to the extent and cause of the difference. Either my earlier findings were somehow incorrect, or a change concerning the apostrophes had taken place. Also, it prompted a discussion about not only the causes but also the remedies; more of a teacher’s approach to the subject.

The results of the earlier study will be reproduced in greater detail in the Results section, in order to contrast the recent findings with the older ones.

2. Aim

The aim of this study is to compare the findings of the 2005 study with new results from a similar study in an upper secondary school. The questions which this study seeks to answer are:

- Which errors are most common in upper secondary classes of today?
- Which approaches does the teacher of these classes take in dealing with and preventing these errors?
- Which approaches are suggested by the secondary sources?
It is hypothesised, based on personal observation, that slight but noticeable overuse will also be encountered. If that turns out to be the case, this additional point will also be addressed:

- What might be the cause of the difference between the upper secondary classes in the later study and the university students of the former one?

### 3. The history of the apostrophe

The apostrophe is a relatively recent addition to the English written language, and one whose use has varied widely throughout the centuries. The very first apostrophe probably entered the English language sometime around the beginning of the 16th century, brought in via Italian printings of old classical texts (Little 1986:15, Garrett 1993:62).

The word itself is derived from the Greek word ‘apostrophos’ meaning “turning away”, or loosely translated, “omission” (Truss 2003:37, Little 1986:15). At first, its primary function was to show that letters in a word had been omitted. Those printers who preferred the roman printing types to the old gothic style used apostrophes to abbreviate words such as *whet’s* for *where is* and *o’er*, for *over*. In so doing, they were both imitating the style of old classical texts (which were having something of a Renaissance at this time), and also helping to adjust the text to neatly fit the margins of the printed texts (Garrett & Austin 1993:62).

Although initially frowned upon, the apostrophe became established in printed texts around the last quarter of the 16th century. It usually marked the omission of a letter, most commonly the letter *e*, often in what in effect was a possessive, such as *James’s* instead of *Jameses*. It was also commonly used in nominative plural, such as *folio’s* instead of *folios*. Eventually, the apostrophe fell out of use in plurals while the possessive apostrophe was extended to words which had not previously contained any *e*, such as *man’s* or *children’s* (Chalker & Weiner 1998:29, Crystal 1996: 127).

The change was in no way immediate. As an indication, Little mentions the changes visible in the literature of the day:
Only 4% of the possessives in the first folio edition of Shakespeare involved apostrophes. Most of the nouns using this possessive form were borrowed words, mainly proper names ending in a or o such as Romeo's. However, the usage spread and by 1685 Shakespeare's fourth folio edition made fairly consistent use of the apostrophe for possession in the singular.

(Little 1986:16)

Around the middle of the 18th century, ‘s seems to have been the generally accepted form of genitive ending. However, the general confusion persisted regarding the plural form. According to Little (1986:16), books from the same day and age “stated that their publication had been registered at Stationers’s Hall, Stationers Hall and Stationers’ Hall”.

Towards the end of the 19th century a general acceptance that s’ should be the indicator of genitive plural was established among grammarians and printers. Agreement on the rules concerning the use of apostrophes seemed to have been reached at last. (Little 1986:16)

But not for long. In 1890, the United States Board of Geographic Names (USBGN) had tired of the arbitrarily appearing apostrophes in geographical names and neatly solved the issue by deciding that apostrophes should be struck from US maps and archives. Their policy has since then been revised several times, sometimes calling for an elimination also of the possessive s, but this policy was more rarely adhered to and eventually abolished. Today, the USGBN allow a handful of places to retain their apostrophes due to local usage, but they are exceptions to the rule (Gasque 1997:197). Sometime between 1895 and 1902 Harrod’s and Lloyd’s Bank dropped the apostrophes from their company names, becoming Harrods and Lloyds Bank (Little 1986:16, Crystal 1996:127). Throughout the 20th into the 21st century, though prescriptive rules have been laid down, the apostrophe remains a feature frequently overused, misplaced or omitted (Little 1986:16, Crystal 1996:127).

4. Rules concerning the apostrophe

The prescriptive rules regarding the apostrophe differs greatly between English and Swedish. Since the pupils to be studied are Swedish, both languages’ rules will be outlined, with special emphasis on contractions and genitives. Throughout this essay,
incorrect forms will be marked with an asterisk and also in some cases with italics to increase readability.

### 4.1 The apostrophe in English

The modern English apostrophe is used either to mark the omission of one or several letters or to indicate genitive case in singular or plural. As demonstrated in section 3, historically these uses were originally one and the same: the omission of letters.

*Contraction* is the term for both a shortened form of a word which can be attached to another word like a suffix, and also the word for the product of both these two combined words. In this essay, the word contraction will be used only to represent the latter form. Contractions which have been recognised as words in their own right, such as *flu* for *influenza* or *info* for *information*, are not spelt with apostrophe. Exceptions to this rule are words which have been lexicalised in forms containing apostrophes, such as *o’clock* or *cat-o’-nine-tails* (Chalker & Weiner 1998:29, Truss 2003:42).

The genitive apostrophe on the other hand is a marker for either possession or close association. Genitive singular is marked by the addition of ‘*s*. As a remnant from the classical origin of the apostrophe, ancient names such as *Socrates* or *Jesus* ordinarily take only an apostrophe in genitive (*Socrates’ works, Jesus’ disciples*). Modern names ending in –*s* may either follow this rule (*Keats’ poems*) or take an additional genitive ‘*s* (*Keats’s poems*), both are acceptable.

It is important to note that possessive determiners (e.g. *your, his or their*) and possessive pronouns (e.g. *yours, hers, theirs,*) are not considered genitive. The word *its* is considered both a possessive determiner and a possessive pronoun, but never a genitive.

When marking a plural word for genitive, the rules are also highly dependant on the final –*s* of a word. Plural nouns which already have a plural *s* receive the apostrophe after this (i.e. *the little girls’ bikes*). In irregular plurals without a final *s*, such as *children*, the whole suffix ‘*s* is added: *the little children’s bikes* (Chalker & Weiner 1998:30).

Regular non-genitive plurals are constructed with a final simple -*s*, without an apostrophe. The genitive form of these plurals get a single ‘*as a suffix. Irregular
nouns whose plural forms are spelled without apostrophes (e.g. children) get the entire ‘s suffix (e.g. the children's books).

A few plural forms are however accepted with apostrophes. The plural of letters and words are generally exempt from the standard rules (e.g. his handwriting is good, except the g’s and q’s).

There are also a few plurals which can be spelled either with or without apostrophes: the plurals of dates and abbreviations (i.e. MPs/MP’s, the 60s/the 60’s) (Chalker & Weiner 1998:30).

The apostrophe is also used to mark quotes within quotes: “The sign says ’Don’t tread on the grass’ in bold letters”. This usage is not covered in this essay.

4.2 The apostrophe in Swedish

Contrary to its English equivalent, the Swedish apostrophe is still almost exclusively used to indicate the omission of letters. This is generally done in an attempt to convey phonetically transcribed slurred speech or slang.

\[
\text{Jag saknar henne redan } \Rightarrow \text{ Ja’ saknar’na redan.}
\]

Today, most generally accepted short forms are written without an apostrophe; words such as dan, sen or nån do not take an apostrophe in modern written Swedish.

Apostrophes in genitives do exist, but their use is heavily restricted. According to the prescriptive rules, they may only be used with words ending with –s, -x or –z, and then only when there is a risk of confusion. For instance, the name Andreas could be confused with the name Andrea in sentences such as “det är Andreas’ bil”, and hence the use of apostrophes is motivated. If the name had been Linus, there would be no risk for such confusion, and thus the use of apostrophes is not motivated: “det är Linus bil”.

Genitive apostrophes in clearly Swedish constructions, such as “Pettersson’s mekaniska AB” are strongly discouraged by the prescriptive rules.

As in English, the apostrophe is also used to mark quotes within quotes: “‘Hit med pengarna’, sa hon” (Svenska Akademien 2003:27). This usage is not covered in this essay.
5. Previous research

Despite the aforementioned prescriptive rules, the use of the apostrophe is still very varied. In an intervention study on British school children aged 9 to 11 years, a significant correlation was established between the explicit teaching of the apostrophe and an increase in correctness among genitives, but not contractions. In contrast, there was no evidence of an increased general syntactic awareness as a result of improvement on apostrophes. Overall, the children had the greatest difficulty with genitives rather than with contractions. A distinction was not, however, made between genitives in plural and singular (Bryant et al. 1997:106).

In a study conducted by Garrett and Austin (1997), German undergraduates of English outperformed both English undergraduates and postgraduates. In their study, the three groups of students were exposed to authentic apostrophe errors derived from sources such as newspapers and public notices. 19 sentences contained overuse in plurals (such as old *telephone’s) or the possessive pronouns (such as *it’s, *her’s and *their’s). 10 sentences contained omissions in genitive forms (such as *mens fashions).

All of the German students spotted all 29 errors, while the English postgraduates spotted on average 27.85 errors and the English undergraduates 22.83 errors. The Germans also judged the errors more severely than the native speakers. All groups judged the overuses slightly more severely than the omissions. Since the difference between these groups was mainly that the Germans and postgraduates had received explicit teaching about the apostrophe, it was concluded that “conscious formulation of the [English genitive apostrophe] is more likely to lead to mastery than simply relying on implicit knowledge. (...) Nevertheless, we can at least tentatively suggest that where naturally occurring native usage of items is highly varied, there might be a stronger case for explicit teaching” (Garrett & Austin 1997:71).

Garret’s and Austin’s conclusions highlight a main issue in my essay: explicit teaching increases correctness, but is more motivated among native speakers than among for instance German students. How motivated such teaching is for the school pupils tested in this essay will be indicated by their error quota.
Finally, Greta Little has conducted an unscientific yet telling little study simply by studying 70 of the signs at an American university:

In 30% of the signs the apostrophe was used in the expected way. 24% had ambiguous forms or ones which fell into areas where variation seems to be tolerated as in 'Museums Publications.' Misplaced apostrophes showed up in 8% of the signs ('Girl's Practice Tonight') and 35% were clearly possessives without apostrophes ('Physical Education Majors Lockers Room').

(Little, 1986:16)

Even though more specific data could have been much more conclusive, this gives a hint that omission from genitives seems to be a more prevalent error than “misplacement” (which in this case could be assumed to include overuse).

6. Material
The texts which are analysed in this essay are hand written essays collected from national tests in English A and B, at upper secondary school level. This sets the texts apart from the texts of the 2005 study, which were excerpts from the Uppsala university USE corpus. The USE texts were produced electronically, without tight time constraints and with access to dictionaries.

In order to differentiate between the participants of the 2005 study and this one, the former will henceforth be referred to as the university students and the latter as the school pupils.

The two classes whose essays are studied are from different grades. The first is a second grade class of Natural Science (the NP class). The thought behind choosing this class is to get students who ought to be conscious about the rules regarding the genitive apostrophe. In accordance with the curriculum, they had already received tuition regarding the use of the genitive at the time they wrote the test. 30 of their essays from the national test in English B were analysed. The errors which they produced are transcribed and can be found in Appendix A1.

The second class was chosen in order to emulate the Electrical Technology class in which I made the observations of overuse during my TP practice. This is a first year class of Electrical Technology (the ET class). They had not explicitly studied the genitive forms at the time of writing the test and are described as somewhat less
motivated when it comes to theoretical subjects. 33 essays from this class were
analysed. The errors were transcribed and can be found in Appendix A2.

In keeping with creating as few unnecessary variables as possible, the two classes
attended the same school in a small city and also had the same teacher.

7. Method
In order to get data comparable to the earlier study, the material was assembled in a
similar way. This required reading the 63 essays, singling out, writing down and
categorising the error type (overuse, omission, misplacement) and collocations
(plural, contraction, genitive singular, genitive plural). The results of the study are
arranged both in number of errors and proportion of errors. The proportions are then
arranged in a “hierarchy of errors”, to discern the relative difficulty of the different
types and collocations.

The English teacher of the classes will be interviewed for his views – and what he
perceives as the views of his classes – on grammar, writing and apostrophes
respectively. The findings of the study will be contrasted both to this interview and to
the previous research about what may promote correctness in dealing with the
apostrophe.

7.1 Relevant errors
Errors will be included regardless of whether the erroneous word is simply missing its
apostrophe (i.e. I don't need my *parents permission for this!), is phonetically
transcribed (i.e. We *dident hang out as much after that) or if a contraction has been
replaced with a personal pronoun (i.e. ...when *your an adult or not).

In keeping with the structure of my earlier essay, this essay deals only with errors
regarding apostrophes in plurals, contractions and genitives in singular and plural. All
genitive, plural and contraction errors which are unrelated with the apostrophe will be
completely ignored, as will any apostrophe error that does not occur in a genitive,
plural or contraction. For instance, overuses in words such as *want’s, or *give’s are
not going to be included in this study.

7.2 Notions of the teacher
B is an experienced teacher in history and English. He has taught both the ET and the NP class. When the interview was conducted, he did not initially know that the focus of the essay was going to be apostrophes. The interview was conducted in Swedish, but has been translated and edited by me. The unedited translated version is included in Appendix B1 and the untranslated unedited version in Appendix B2.

Initially, B was asked to grade the popularity of writing exercises among the pupils, compared to the other basic skills speech, writing, reading and listening. He deemed speech the most popular skill, followed by reading, writing and listening last. He stated that reading and writing were often practiced in combination: “We try to always give them an opportunity to read out loud what they have written themselves.”

When asked which skills were the most developed among the pupils, he ranked speaking the highest and writing the lowest.

Making them produce [written material] is not difficult, but they make recurring errors, both in grammar and spelling. They are bad at learning from their mistakes. When they get their essays back, almost nobody looks at them if we don't go through them together. When you practice [grammatical problems] explicitly, everything is fine, if they have a test with grammatical exercises, everything goes fine, but when they produce [written material] freely, they make the same error again. Some get it right without knowing the rule behind, but quite a lot of pupils want grammar and rules. Or, the technical classes usually don't. But the question is whether the results really differ.

B estimates that approximately 25 - 30 percent of the teaching hours is spent on spelling and other writing-specific problems.

We have invested quite a lot on that, since we notice that it's on a lower level than the rest of the skills. (...) There's a lot of grammar in the homeworks too, but lesson-wise it's about 25 percent. Homework checkups usually contain a writing exercise.

B claims to be satisfied with the amount of time spent on writing-specific teaching.

The question is whether the pupils would be able to take more. And the question in that case is whether it would deduct from the time we get to train something else.

B claims to be rather content regarding the pupils' use of apostrophes, characterizing it as “OK, but not 100 percent”.

It's probably depending on whether it's genitive or not. Sometimes [the apostrophe] is in the wrong place in it's and its. Genitive is probably completely OK. (...) It's not something that we spend any extra effort on in genitives, but rather in contractions.

On a side note, B voices the opinion that he thinks the apostrophe is “on its way out, at least on the internet.”
B has never treated the apostrophe as a comprehensive problem, regardless of whether it occurs in a genitive, contraction or plural. “Not together, as a general thing. No. I bring it up after anyone has written something [incorrect]. At contractions or so.”

When asked whether he believes it necessary to devote time to explaining the apostrophe to the whole class, or whether time would be better spent on other subjects, he responds that:

> Everything is worth explaining, but getting the verbs into order takes precedence. Getting rid of the overuse of ing-form [also takes precedence]. No, I talk about it if it turns up, not otherwise.

**8. Results**

The errors found in the material will be detailed in the following section. In order to see both the total number of occurrences and the percentage of the whole categories, the figures will first be presented in raw data form, then in a more visual diagram in order to determine the relative quantity (and thus relevance) of the error categories.

**8.1 The NP class**

The NP class produced rather long essays on the subjects “Rites of passage,” “Young people today are spoilt and lazy” and “It's hard being a young person today.” The number of errors, as well as the percentile quota they represent are presented in raw figure form in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item:</th>
<th>total occurrences</th>
<th>total errors</th>
<th>overuse</th>
<th>omission</th>
<th>misplacement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>2 (0,48%)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraction</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>15 (12,29%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive singular</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9 (81,81%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive plural</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5 (71,42%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As demonstrated above, the most numerous item was plurals, followed by contractions, genitive singular and last genitive plural. The percentile error quota almost stand in reverse proportion to the number of occurrences: the lesser number of
occurrences, the higher amount of errors. This can be interpreted as the more advanced and unfamiliar constructions being used the least.

In order to present a more visual view of the proportions, and also in keeping with the earlier essay, the figures are presented as a diagram.

As evident from this visualization, the genitive forms are the most error-ridden, and the most common type of error is omission. Contrary to the expectations of the teacher B, contractions had a very lower error quota compared to the genitives. Contrary to my own expectations, there were only two cases of overuse in plurals. This makes for an error quota of 0.43 percent; almost invisible in the diagram.

Misplacement is also a very minor problem compared to omission: 93.33 percent of the contraction errors were omissions and the rest misplacements. For genitives in singular, the figure was 100 percent omission. Plural genitives had the highest misplacement rate with 20 percent of the errors.

8.2 The ET class

The raw figures of the ET class are presented in table 2 below. Since there were no genitive plurals produced at all, the score for this item has been listed as “-” rather than “0”.
Table 2: The ET class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>total occurrences</th>
<th>total errors</th>
<th>overuse</th>
<th>omission</th>
<th>misplacement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>4 (1.10%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraction</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>33 (23.57%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>32(22.85%)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive singular</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10 (71.42%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive plural</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Compared to the NP class, the essays of the ET class were slightly shorter. Also, there were somewhat more contractions and genitives in singular; 140 contractions compared 122 in the NP class and 14 singular genitives compared to 11 in the NP class. The class produced somewhat less plurals: 364 plurals compared to 411 in the NP class. There were no occurrences at all of genitive plural, arguably the most advanced construction.

As in the NP class, omission was the most common error and genitive the most error-ridden item. And again, though there were more cases of overuse, the overuse quota for plurals was extremely low: 1.1 percent. The error quota was almost three times higher in genitives than contractions.

The relationship between the error quotas is shown in diagram 2 below, demonstrating that the error quota is almost three times higher in genitives than contractions. Errors in genitive plurals are completely absent from the list, but it can be assumed that if the category existed, it would probably be represented in the upper sections of the diagram as well. As before, the overuses are in the bottom, barely visible in comparison to other errors.
Compared to the NP class, the error quotas of the ET class differed slightly. The difference was most evident in the case of contractions, where the error quota was almost twice as high. The error quota of overuse in plurals was more than twice as high, but given that the difference is made by two errors vis-à-vis four, the difference is hardly significant. The error quota regarding genitives in singular was actually slightly lower than in the NP class, but neither this is a significant difference.

More importantly, despite these divergences the order of error quotas was very much the same. This strengthens the validity of the findings and makes a valid case for combining the data of both classes into one table for comparison to the older study.

8.3 Both classes combined

Below, the errors of the two upper secondary classes are combined into one table. Though the scores are evened out, the error quotas are not significantly changed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item:</th>
<th>total occurrences</th>
<th>total errors</th>
<th>overuse</th>
<th>omission</th>
<th>misplacement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>775</td>
<td>6 (0.77%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraction</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>32 (12.21%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>28 (10.69%)</td>
<td>2 (1.57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19 (76%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>19 (76%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural + genitive</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5 (71.42%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4 (57.14%)</td>
<td>1 (14.28%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diagram 2: The ET class.

Table 3: Total amount of errors from upper secondary pupils
As the above table and diagram indicates, the most troublesome categories for these classes is neither plural nor contraction, but genitive in both singular and plural form. It can be concluded that the genitive forms are much more prone to errors than contractions, that misplacement is a much less common error than omission, and that overuse is negligible.

**8.4 Comparison with the older study**

The school pupils overall produced more errors than the university students, which is to be expected given the circumstances. Less experience with the English language, less training and less time for the pupils to finish their essays made such a difference predictable. One could also argue that the university students could be expected to have an overall higher degree of intrinsic motivation, having chosen their subject more voluntarily than the school pupils.

As evidenced by Table 4 below, the university students produced a lot more items than the school pupils with one exception: the contractions. The cause for this is most probably that the university students were writing in a more formal style. Since their essays were produced without time limit and typed on computer, their essays were naturally also considerably longer.
Table 4. Number of occurrences and errors in the 2005 study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Errors</th>
<th>Overuse</th>
<th>Omission</th>
<th>Misplacement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>1357</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural &amp; genitive</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraction</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding the distribution of errors, the results are very similar to the one from my earlier essay. To showcase the likeness, the results of the earlier study are compiled into a diagram in the same style as in this essay.

![Diagram 4: Proportion of errors in the 2005 study.]

As evident when compared to Diagram 3 in section 10.3, the likeness is striking. Even if the percentage of errors is much lower, the distribution and proportions of the staples are similar. In a way, Diagram 3 can be seen as an exaggerated version of Diagram 4 above.

To further compare the studies, the error quotas will be shown in a hierarchical table, next to each other.

Table 5: Comparison of error quotas between new and old study
### New study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Omission genitive singular:</td>
<td>76.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Omission genitive plural:</td>
<td>57.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Omission contraction:</td>
<td>10.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Misplacement contraction:</td>
<td>6.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Misplacement plural genitive:</td>
<td>5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overuse plural:</td>
<td>0.77%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Old study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Omission genitive plural:</td>
<td>22.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Omission genitive singular:</td>
<td>13.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Omission contraction:</td>
<td>8.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Misplacement contraction:</td>
<td>4.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Misplacement genitive:</td>
<td>2.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overuse plural:</td>
<td>0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 9. Conclusion

In order to demonstrate the findings of this essay, the original questions from the aim section will now be revisited.

- **Which errors are most common in upper secondary classes of today?**

Just like among the students of the former study, the most common errors among the pupils in this study are omissions in genitives in plural or singular, followed by omissions in contractions.

- **Which approaches does the teacher of these classes take in dealing with and preventing these errors?**

The teacher B explicitly talks about the rules regarding apostrophes only when the need arises, and not as a comprehensive subject. B spontaneously sees contractions as a bigger problem than genitives, which is completely understandable: the contraction errors are with a good margin more numerous than any other error. A total of 32 contraction errors were collected in the material, while there were a total of 24 errors in genitive singular and plural combined. Thus the illusion is created that the category as such is more prone to errors, but this study shows that the percentage of correctness among contractions is in fact significantly higher than among genitives or plural genitives.

However, it could also be argued that the most frequently occurring error is in effect a bigger problem and therefore more worthy of attention. Any discussion about the relatively stable contraction error quota may also end up in the same uncertainty as the old unsolvable riddle about which came first: the chicken or the egg. If indeed the
contractions are more prone to errors, this might in part have been counteracted by the greater time spent training correct usage of apostrophes in contractions. Or, if the effect of training is taken in regard, it could be that since B sees many apostrophe errors in contractions, he trains them a lot and the pupils get a better result regarding them.

- Which approaches are suggested by the secondary sources?

The secondary literature suggests that explicit training of the apostrophe leads to a higher degree of correctness. Whether this is warranted depends on the extent of the problem, a subject that will be more thoroughly dealt with in section 11.

It was also hypothesised, based on personal observation, that slight but noticeable overuse would also be encountered. This turned out not to be the case. More than anything, this study mirrored that of the earlier one. There were indeed a few occurrences of overuse in plural, but an error frequency of 0.77 percent is hardly a common enough error to warrant special attention.

That I during my teacher practice got the impression that overuse was more common could be attributed to several reasons, suggestions of which are listed below.

1. **Selective vision.** The earlier observations during my teacher practice are primarily incorrect. A few instances of overuse may have caught my eye, leading to the impression that they were more frequently occurring than they really were. The eye is attracted to the unexpected, leading to an incorrect conclusion. However, when put under scientific scrutiny, this preconception is proven false.

2. **Class differences.** School classes can be just as much individuals as the pupils which comprise them. Trends, tendencies and personal preferences could differ between two ET classes, just as between an NP and an ET class.

3. **The power of effort.** Another difference between the essays in this study and the written material from my teacher practice was the contexts in which they were written. The essays I came in contact with in my everyday work was indeed everyday work also to the pupils who wrote it. When correctness is not of the essence, one might let errors slip by more or less from lack of attention. In contrast, the corpus material collected for this study is from the national test in the B course, an occasion where the pupils most likely went out of their way to produce as correct a text as
possible. If this kind of pressure contributes positively by a heightening of the attention, or on the contrary lowers the correctness due to a heightened stress, however, is a subject more suited for another essay.

10. Teaching the apostrophe

Many errors in this study involved confusing contractions such as it’s or who’s with possessive determiners such as its or whose. Pupils who are prone to this error can be told to see if they are contractions by trying to write out the words in full. When the word can be replaced with “it is” or “it has”, it is a contraction and can be replaced with it’s. Otherwise the word should be its. This approach can be applied on all contractions:

- can’t = can not (*cant)
- who’s = who is / who has (*whose)
- they’re = they are (*their)
- you’re = you are (*your)
- there’s = there is (*theirs)

In order to show both sides of the coin, a list could also be compiled with the possessive determiners and possessive pronouns, none of which ever take an apostrophe:

**Possessive determiners:**

- my  our
- your  your
- his  their
- her  their
- its  their

**Possessive pronouns:**

- mine  ours
- yours  yours
- his  theirs
- hers  theirs
- its  theirs

(Chalker & Weiner 1998:30)
11. Discussion: the relevance of teaching the apostrophe

The problem leading to the extensive confusion among native speakers of English in using the apostrophe or not can be said to be of a recursive nature: uncertainty leads to errors in official places (e.g. a sign, a brand name, etc.), people read it and become uncertain themselves. Since Swedes generally lack the massive input of erroneous apostrophes on signs and billboards that native speakers are exposed to, they may in fact be less confused about its usage than natives.

As Little (1986:17) argues, conflicting messages from an early age are sure to create confusion. It could also be that positive transfer keeps the Swedish students from overusing the apostrophe, in a way leaving them better equipped than native speakers to handle the troublesome sign. Although Swedish learners’ negative transfer possibly leads to underuse, this error still seems to be less frowned upon than overuse (Garrett & Austin 1993). The policy of the US National Board of Geographical Names is to consciously omit apostrophes in place names. This may in time lead the way to a national abolishment of the apostrophe. It could be argued that it would be vain to keep spending so much effort on a teaching the use of the dying apostrophe.

In defence of spending time and effort on teaching the apostrophe here and now, Bryant et al. (1997) argue that misuse of the apostrophe is becoming a public stigma and is therefore an important feature.

The apostrophe has become a kind of cultural shibboleth: educated people, it is typically assumed, use it well and uneducated people do not. In some circumstances, such as applying for a job or even writing an examination essay, the misuse of the apostrophes can be a serious disadvantage.

(Bryant et al. 1997:107)

Drawing once again upon the research of Garrett & Austin (1993), it can also be noted that this cultural stigma appears to be slightly stronger among non-native speakers. Given the status of English as a lingua franca in many fields of work, this problem could affect pupils who are to apply for jobs across Europe.

But the statement of Bryant et al. quoted above does not account for the fact that more obvious errors can be an even greater cultural stigma. The notion of the teacher B that more immediate problems take precedence over the apostrophe definitely carries great relevance for any practically-minded teacher. When the pupils have a
hard time with ing-forms and irregular verbs - problems that affect the spoken language as well as the written - it is logical to prioritise these over a minor punctuation mark that even native speakers struggle with.

It is also noteworthy that the teacher B believes that the apostrophe is on its way out of the English language. This is in a way supported by the little study by Little referenced in section 5: omission is more prominent than overuse also among natives. Ironically, the sign which stands for omission is itself often omitted. If the trend continues, the apostrophe may in time become completely obsolete – and with it, this whole essay.

12. Summary

The results of this study are conclusive: although the school pupils had a generally much higher frequency of errors than the university students in the 2005 study, the errors were similarly distributed. The two proportionally most common errors were omissions in genitive singular (76 percent errors) or plural (57.14 percent). Contraction omissions were only the third most common error (10.69 percent). The impression of the teacher that they were the most common error sources was most probably induced by the fact that contraction errors were more numerous than the genitives. Contrary to my impressions from my teaching practice, overuse in plurals remained a very minor source of errors in the data analysed (0.77 percent).
References


Appendix A1: the errors of the NP class

**Contraction errors**
31: (MP) We *shouldn't blame the childrens for being lazy and spoilt, it isn’t their fault.

4: (OM) "*Don't be so lazy, you are always at the computer, what kind of music are you listening to, turn it down."
4: (OM) We have so much choices that we *don't know what to do with our lifes.
4: (OM) They *don't understand all the stres that we talk abot.
10: (OM) *That's okay with me since I know that one day I will move out from my parents house and get a job, get married, have kids and live the everyday grownup life.
14: (OM) If these actions above would be what decides when *your an adult or not then every country would have “adult” children at different ages.
14: (OM, OM) Because in a few-other countries *your allowed to drink alcohol when *your 16 while Sweden has a 18 year limit.
14: (OM) This is when the parents should take their responsibility and give then a chance to see *whats waiting.
14: (OM) I think *your an adult when *your able to take care of yourself.
25: (OM) I think *that's strange, you can drink when you are 18 but not buy until you are 20.
25: (OM) People like me *that's been helping out alot at home when they were young have much higher hopes to manage to live on their own.
21: (OM) Now, two weeks later we still *don't know what the schools board is going to do.
17: (OM) For two weeks now *iv got my drivers license.
10: (OM) Well you see, *that's how things happen in real life.

**Genitive errors**
5: (OM) Being adult, at least for me, means so much more than just being able to get a *drivers license and buy booze.
9: (OM) Apart from age I think a *persons characteristics decides if you are an adult.
9: (OM) And I think that many of *todays young adults aren't ready for taking the responsibility that they are expected to.
10: (OM) (...) in Sweden you are allowed to get your *drivers license at the age of 18, and buy alcohol at the age of 20.
10: (OM) Thats okay with me since I know that one day I will move out from my *parents house and get a job, get married, have kids and live the everyday grownup life.
21: (OM) Now, two weeks later we still don't know what the *schools board is going to do.
17: (OM) For two weeks now *iv got my *drivers license.
17: (OM) Almost every adult hav a *drivers license, and most people connecting it with a rite of passage.
19: (OM) Life is full of expences you have to make *Drivers-license, car, house, familly and so on.
27: (OM) *Todays young children need to have high standards to get the kind of job or education that they want.
29: (OM) Now this *girls future is interupted by some new events to think about.

**Plural genitive errors**
29: (MP) But they can’t, and now it’s their *parent’s task to be more strict to them, by making sure they’re studying and don’t just give them anything they want.
16: (MP) Now you don’t have to follow your *parent’s rules and you can do whatever you want to.

12: (OM) I'll be eighteen before we go, I don't need my *parents permission for this!
1: (OM)You can go where ever and whenever you want without your *parents consent.
1: (OM) Sometimes the parents are getting blamed for their *childrens bad behaviour and recklessness but the young people too have responsibility.
1: (OM) The *parents role is to be their parents and help them and prepare them for adulthood, because the parents are the ones with the experience.

20: (OM) But is an unmarried 27 year old, unemployed single woman living at her *parents home, a kid!?

**Plural errors**

6: (OU, OU) (...)but then when you are 23 you have *dept's uptill your *ear's so if you don't get a really nice job you need to move back to your parents.
Appendix A2: The errors of the ET class

Contraction errors
29: (MP) We had two teams and it *wasn't my team who was in the final, but I could feel the atmosphere to play that final.

6: (OM) I was lucky one of my friends *didn't take the shampoo befor she start swim and hers hair was like an saltcrystal.
6: (OM) *Didn't waist and time to try to hold me awake.
7: (OM) Then we got a very nice plan at eneby: eneby it a motocross and rally map so we *can't drive on it the all night.
7: (OM) (...) then we grab the bags and we drove to eneby, but this time we *didn't take the moped now we driven motocross (...) 
7: (OM) (...) then we started to race of course won alex he got the best bike and *his the best driver.
7: (OM, OM) Mike said what was that alex! go out an take a look so he stuck out hes head and siad holy shit and jumped in agien *its a bour everyone lay there and robert said it the bour gone i said shutup, but alex take a look one more time, *its gone he said.
11: (OM) And I *dident.
11: (OM) We *dident hang out as much after that.
11: (OM) She come to my house and tell me she *dident like me anymore.
12: (OM) In that week I worked whit a man *whos called Eddy.
13: (OM) But mom *couldn't find any good Stores So we kept looking until we came by one store (...) 
15: (OM) No, *thats wrong.
18: (OM) *Thats fine by me, and many others who are scared by the dark.
18: (OM) *Thats the most boring thing of the winter.
20: (OM) I live in Stockholm the Capital of Sweden so we have not far to the boat, the boat is very large, i *don't mean large like titanic a little bit smaller
22: (OM) Ah *can't wait til it's summer.
22: (OM) But the really fun parts is when *im whit my friends out partying, everyone is out that evening.
22: (OM, OM) *Can't get rid of my memory when *im laying on the beach a warm afternoon just enjoying my time.
22: (OM) I have pretty much nothing good to say about autumn, the two things that counts really is this: My every year visit to England when *im visiting my grandpa.
22: (OM) Then I hit the icerink, *its really fun to skate and play hockey whit friends, then afterwards drink some warm chocolate.
25: (OM) My favourite Place at summer is Portugal, not only because *its my home country it is also a very friendly and hot place during summer.
25: (OM) (...)the fishes they are very different to the ones we have here, *its not like the swedish bass it has several colors, almost if you imagine that a rainbow where a fish.
25: (OM) The winter is not realy my favorite because there *isent really much to do during that time.
25: (OM) Myself would chose the snow, because you *can't really do much with the rain.
27: (OM, OM) I REMEMBER THIS SUMMER SO MUCH, AND WHY *ITS SO FUN SUMMER *ITS BECAUSE I MEET A NEW FRIEND.
30: (OM) After the breakfast we going down to the wather, my brother and I going to swim *thats the first thing we gonna do.
33: (OM) The boat had a glas floor so you could see lots of fishes and magnets and other things i *dident know what it was.
33: (OM) Nowadays *Im usually not driving the moped.
33: (OM, OM) *Im probably going to to sell it pretty soon since *Im not using it.

Genitive errors
17: (MP) (...)and we was starting to get hungry so we went to *Mc'donalds in Karlstad.
2: (OM) We spended the new *years eve on Miami Beach where there was alot of fire works.
2: (OM) To the *winters chill.
7: (OM) (...)it was in the middle of the day so everybody went to my *moms* house to talk and make a plan where we going to camp, Robert said can we not camp at Nicksta, but everyone just said NO!

8: (OM) Another whole year has passed by, I think to my self, but the really funny and exiting thing about new *years* eve is that you can shoot rockets and light crackers.

9: (OM) I remember it like it was yesterday, spring of 2000, the *winds* gentle touch, stroking my face.

10: (OM) We did not hear from them the last hour, until a car pulled up at *Sammis* house.

12: (OM) (...)when I came there we went to *Mcdonalds* to get som food, home to me, my father, my little brother and my half mother.

27: (OM) *SHES NAME IS ANGELICA AND SHE AND I HAD SO FUN WE TOK WE ASK MY MOM CAN WE TAKE YOUR CAR AND DRIVE LITTLE?

33: (OM) And on a friday more then week after my birthday I got my *drivers* licens and on the same day the trades men called and said that the moped was ready.

**Plural errors**

4: (OU) We printed out pictures at her and asked *people's* at the beach, bar, hotel, no one had seen her.

7: (OU) (...)som we went to the gasstation to buy wood for the fireplace, then we needed to find two *tent's*, that was a problem because no one had a tent.

31: (OU) There was *lot's* of people on the plane and many more empty seats.

31: (OU) A few *day's* later we was going on a trip to a island a few miles away.
Appendix B 1: The interview in Swedish

Vilka av de kommunikativa färdigheterna anser du att dina elever uppskattar mest att öva, i rangordning?

tal: 1
skrift: 3
läsning: 2
lyssning: 4


Vilka färdigheter anser du är deras starkaste sidor, i rangordning?

tal: 1
skrift: 3
läs: 2
lyssning: 2


Ungefär hur stor del av undervisningen, procentuellt sett, uppskattar du att ni ägnar åt stavning och andra skriftspråkliga problem?


Är du nöjd med hur mycket ni tränar skriftspråkliga problem, eller skulle du vilja att det vore mer eller mindre?


Vilka mönster, generellt sett, har du lagt märke till när du rättar elevernas skriftspråk?


Vilka mönster, generellt, lägger du märke till beträffande elevernas användning av apostrofer?

**Har ni gått igenom företeelsen förekomst/placering av apostrof som ett övergripande problem, oavsett om det gäller genitiv, sammandragning eller plural?**


**Anser du att apostrofer överhuvudtaget är värt att gå igenom, eller finns det andra skriftspråkliga problem som du anser att det är viktigare att ägna tiden åt?**

Allt är värt att ägna tid åt, men att få ordning på verben har högre prioritet. Att få bort överanvändandet av ingform. Nå, jag pratar om det om det kommer upp, men annars inte.
Which of the communicative skills do you consider your pupils to most appreciate practicing? Grade your answer.

Speech: 1  
Writing: 3  
Reading: 2  
Listening: 4  

Comment: Reading and writing are often practiced in combination. We try to always give them an opportunity to read out loud what they have written themselves. This [the NV class] is a very creative class, they enjoy writing.

Which skills do you consider their foremost? Grade your answer.

Speech: 1  
Writing: 3  
Reading: 2  
Listening: 2  

Comment: Making them produce [written material] is not difficult, but they make recurring errors, both in grammar and spelling. They are bad at learning from their mistakes. When they get their essays back, almost nobody looks at them if we don't go through them together. When you practice [grammatical problems] explicitly, everything is fine, if they have a test with grammatical exercises, everything goes fine, but when they produce [written material] freely, they make the same error again. Some get it right without knowing the rule behind, but quite a lot of pupils want grammar and rules. Or, the technic classes usually don't. But the question is whether the results really differ.

Approximately how great a part of the teaching hours, percentually, do you estimate that you spend on spelling and other writing-specific problems?

We have invested quite a lot on that, since we notice that it's on a lower level than the rest of the skills. It's quite a lot actually, 25 - 30 percent. There's a lot of grammar in the home works too, but lesson-wise it's about 25 percent. Homework checkups usually contain a writing exercise. It's probably more time than you'd think.

Are you satisfied with the time you spend on writing-specific problems, or would you like it to be more or less?

The question is whether the pupils would be able to take more. And the question in that case is whether it would deduct from the time we get to train something else.

Which patterns, generally speaking, have you noticed when you correct the written language of the pupils?

What I think most about is that certain words, like for instance which or because, must have been learned erroneously from the start. It's so "cemented". That's probably what I think matters the most. Some frequent words are repeated erroneously all the time. Grammatically, I don't see any such clear patterns, except that it's difficult to practice grammar since they don't have the basics from the Swedish. All the pupils who study here are from five different upper compulsory schools [högstadier]. When you notice what they know and don't know [about grammar], you can soon deduct which upper compulsory schools they have attended, from what their teachers use to practice a bit more. And on the contrary,
what they neglect. What you also notice is that repetitive exercises [nöta in-övningar] actually yields results. Especially concerning spelling and irregular verbs. It makes a difference, obviously.

**Which general patterns do you notice concerning the pupils' usage of apostrophes?**

Catastrophes, you mean? [Laughter] Nah, I think the pupils are pretty OK. But not 100 percent. But then again, usually natives aren't that perfect either. It's probably depending on whether it's genitive or not. Sometimes it's in the wrong place in it's and it's. Genitive is probably completely OK. Generally I think the apostrophe is on its way out, at least on the internet. By the way, I've been in Sidney, and been to King's cross, which is spelt with apostrophe on one of the signs, and without on one next to the first one. It's not something that we spend any extra effort on in genitives, but rather in contractions.

**Have you ever gone through the occurrence/placement of the apostrophe as a comprehensive problem, whether it occurs in genitive, contraction or plural?**

Not together, as a general thing. No. I bring it up after anyone has written something [incorrect]. At contractions or so.

**Do you consider apostrophes at all worthy of spending time on explaining, or are there more important writing-related problems which you consider more worthy of your time?**

Everything is worth explaining, but getting the verbs into order takes precedence. Getting rid of the overuse of ing-form. No, I talk about it if it turns up, not otherwise.